



(Embargoed until Delivery – 1pm)

Archbishop Philip Wilson, President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

Address to the Holy Father at lunch with the Australian Bishops

St Mary's Cathedral House – Saturday, July 19, 2008

Holy Father, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you here today on behalf of the Bishops of Australia.

We are gathered today, on the site of the magnificent Basilica of Mary Help of Christians, the Mother church of Catholicism in Australia. As a group of Bishops, it is interesting to note that it was here, on the site of St Mary's that the first Archbishop of Sydney, John Bede Polding performed the first Episcopal ordination carried out on Australian soil, in 1844. That new bishop, Francis Murphy, was to be the first Bishop of Adelaide – my predecessor. Little could the people gathered on this site then imagine that the day would come when more than 40 Australian bishops would celebrate Mass with the Holy Father in St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney. We remember also that it was to this site that Blessed Mary Mackillop often came to consult with the Archbishop of Sydney about the life and development of her new congregation.

On a day like today it is fitting that we look back and honour those who came before us and it is also humbling. As we face the challenges of protecting and teaching the Faith in these times we remember the humble beginnings of the Church in Australia. When the first Europeans arrived in Australia in 1788 there was no Catholic priest on board the fleet. Permission for one had been sought and denied by the British authorities. The first priest given permission to celebrate Mass, in 1803, was himself a convict, an Irish political prisoner. After an uprising of Irish Catholics against the government, his permission to celebrate Mass was revoked. It wasn't until 1820 that the Mass could be legally celebrated again.

From these inauspicious beginnings, through the faith and devotion of many good bishops, priests, religious and laypeople, has grown a church which is today the biggest religious grouping in Australia. The Church in Australia in 2008 is a wonderful multicultural manifestation of the Body of Christ. From the English Benedictine beginnings of Archbishop Polding to the strong Irish character that emerged, we have in more recent decades welcomed immigrants from many countries including Italy and other parts of Europe, the Philippines and other Asian countries, South America and the Middle East. Many immigrants brought with them the traditions of the Eastern Catholic Churches, adding to the richness of Catholic life in this country. We are blessed indeed.

Holy Father, you know that alongside the many blessings bestowed on us, we face challenges which are both particularly local and also universal. Secularism and relativism have made inroads into the faith of some. The breakdown of the family and a culture of sexual and moral permissiveness has taken a heavy toll and has distanced many people from the Church. The terrible scandal of sexual abuse carried out by some clergy, religious and Church personnel and the way these issues were addressed in the past, has had deep and lasting consequences.

Holy Father, I can assure you that we are all making every effort in our response to cases of sexual abuse, with compassion and care for victims.

It is against this background of challenges and blessings that we embrace the experience of World Youth Day, here on our own shores, with such profound Christian hope. We pray that these days spent together with you, our Chief Shepherd, and with the youth of the world, will not only enliven the pilgrims who attend, through their personal encounter with the love of Christ, but will also enflame the Church in Australia and the entire nation.

We commit ourselves to being open to the gifts of World Youth Day which we remain firm in hope will be poured forth by the Holy Spirit. We assure you, Holy Father, of our most tremendous desire to join with you, in communion with the Holy Spirit, in renewing the life of the Church in this country and proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

Already we have begun, as an Episcopal Conference, to examine the ways in which we can join together to enliven the Church in Australia by proclaiming current convictions and future vision as to the pastoral needs of the local Church.

This pastoral planning has three themes as its focus. Those themes are Contemplation – engagement with God; Communion – engagement with each other; and Mission – engagement with the modern world.

Holy Father, we thank you for this precious time spent together today, celebrating the Eucharist and now sharing a meal. We pledge to you our loyalty and our love, and we assure you of our constant prayers for you in your Petrine Ministry, for your health and your happiness.

Here at St Mary's Cathedral, we join with you in praying the prayer with which you concluded your Encyclical *Spe Salvi*:

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!” (n.50).